

CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN PALESTINE

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ABSTRACTS

Palestine, the home of the world's three major religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Hence, considers the first center of tourism due to the faithful of these three major world faiths flocking to Palestine to engage in sacred pilgrimages. Some of these sites which are frequently visited are Jerusalem, Nazareth, Jericho, Bethlehem and Hebron. Palestine was for many centuries a destination of pilgrims and visitors of Muslims and Christians from all over the world. Unfortunately, Palestine after the 1948 war fell under Israeli occupation and was exposed to many catastrophes up until this time; all this led to the instability and the decrease in the number of tourists to Palestine; which had become a dangerous area which reduced the flow of tourism in general. At the same time, came the peace negotiations between the PLO (Palestinian liberation organization) and Israel in Oslo which was signed in Washington in 1993. In this period there was an economic recovery and tourism in the Palestinian territories, especially in the West Bank and Gaza Strip started to once again flourish. The Primary purpose of this paper is to display the significance of the religious tourism in Palestine and influence of the Israeli occupation on religious tourism and restrictions of movement and freedom for visitors and the local community to visit those holy sites and also how it effects the tourism market growth, also the measures which are used and their negative impact on all tourism.

This paper concludes to that Palestine is unique, due to its history, heritage, culture, geographic location, environment and religions. This study suggests to the ministry of tourism and antiquities in Palestine to

create new ways to protect the Islamic and Christian places in Palestine as well as to invite new tourists to visit it and experience dark tourism in Palestine which focuses on historical atrocities inflicted on the Palestinian people and their quest for equality and freedom.

Key words: *Palestine, war, political instability, religious tourism, history.*

INTRODUCTION

Palestine is located in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world and lies upon the southwest of Asia on the east of the Mediterranean basin. The site has a significant and strategic location through which links Asia with Africa and the Mediterranean Sea with the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean (Refer to Figure 1). While the climate is pleasant because it has four seasons throughout the year (summer, autumn, winter and spring), the number of Palestinians inside and outside Palestine is approximately 10,094,565 (PCBS, 2006).

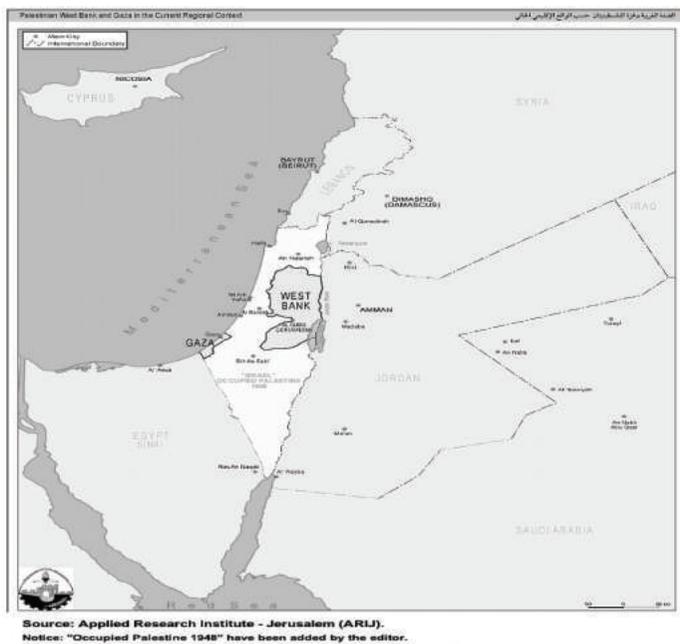


Figure 1: Map of Palestine

The area of Palestine is almost 27,000 sq km, the area of the occupied Palestinian territories controlled by Israel is 21,000 sq km, while the Palestinian national authority control 6000 sq km, which includes the West Bank and Gaza Strip. (Al-Rimmawi, 2003).

History of Palestine

The history of Palestine is refers to the (Lower Paleolithic era) Tel Ubeidiya which is located near the Jordon valley, this site proves that (Homo erectus) existed in Palestine therefore; many ancient races resided there, the Canaanites undoubtedly the, the first people to live in land of Palestine and the first to establish a civilization in it, in the same period, arriving in Palestine were the philistines who integrated and mixed with the original people.

In modern history, on April 1920, the British mandate controlled Palestine at the same time, the British mandate allowed Jewish immigration to Palestine and helped the Zionist organizations expel the Palestinian farmers from their farms and build settlements. From 1932-1948 British mandate's proposed a Partition plan for Palestine and it called (The Peel Partition Plan) which suggested to establish a state for Jews in Palestine and partition it into territories, as an area under Arab control, and an area under Jewish control and area under the British mandate control which led to a revolution of the Palestinian people and Arab volunteers against this plan (Sabri *et al.*, 2005).

Palestine over the years has been subjected to many disasters and tragedies, In the year 1948 (The Catastrophe), the Jewish Zionists occupied Palestinian cities and destroyed homes and committed numerous massacres in Palestinian cities and villages and the displacement scattered many of the people of Palestine to various areas, and even outside Palestine to the neighboring countries (Refer to Figure 2). In the year 1967 The Tragedy of the Zionist Jewish occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in the year 1987 we witnessed the start of the first intifada against the Israeli occupation.

Then, came the peace negotiations between the Palestinian liberation organization (PLO) and the Israeli government in Oslo which signed this agreement in Washington in 1993, the Oslo accords on September, 1995 divided the west bank in areas (Area A, Area B and Area C). The second

Intifada” began in September 2000 because of Ariel Sharon’s visit to “Al-Aqsa or al Haram al-Sharif “which was a provocation to the Palestinian people and all the entire Islamic world. After that, all cities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were subjected to the repression of the Israeli army in the form of killing and suppression of Palestinian demonstrations until Israeli bulldozers and tanks demolished houses and committed massacres against the Palestinian people. In fact, because of that, Israel destroyed the infrastructure and superstructure of the Palestinian areas and increased the poverty rate for families in the Palestinian territories by 65.8%, according to (PCBS, 2006).



Source: <http://nakba.sis.gov.ps/photo%20gallery/55.jpg>

Figure 2: The Catastrophe (1948) in Palestine

Tourism and Religious Sites in Palestine

Palestine plays vital an important and role in attracting and motivating the tourists who find interest in religions, history, cultures, traditions and environment. Palestine is sacred for the three monotheistic world religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. In addition, it is a place holy for Muslims due to it being home to prophets such as Ibrahim (Abraham), Zakaiyya, Isa (Jesus), Suleiman (Solomon), David (Dawoud), Joseph (Yusuf), Jacob (Yaquob). There are a lot of places that feature diverse tourist importance to the world through ancient cities.

Al-Quds (Jerusalem) is the basic hub and key for tourism and pilgrimage in Palestine, the first destination for those who visit Palestine, (Refer to Figure3) sacred and spiritual for Muslims through al Aqsa Mosque (Far Mosque) which was the first Qibla in Islam (Direction of Muslims to pray) and second Mosque built on earth after Al-Kaba in Mecca and third holy shrine of Islam after (Al Haram Al-Sharief) in Mecca and the prophets Mohammed's Mosque in Medina. From this city (Jerusalem) prophet Mohammed escalated to paradise as mentioned in Holy Quran in Sura (Isra & Miraj) and the prophetic Sunnah (traditions of the prophet may Allah's peace and be upon him). Prophet Mohammed said, it is the duty of every Muslim to pray in the Al-Aqsa Mosque because each prayer equals to 500 prayers. As well as Caliph Omar bin al khattab who visited it and prayed after that he established the Mosque of Omar near Al- Aqsa Mosque.



Source: <http://www.walkingtojerusalem.org/images/jerusalem.jpg>

Figure 3: Jerusalem (Al-Quds)

The noble sanctuary (Al Haram Al-Sharief) contains many religious buildings and religious sites to obtain knowledge and some of them for the purposes of everyday life, such as masjids, schools (Madrasas), libraries, institutes museums, cemeteries, corners (Zawiya), khanqas, shrines (Maqams), citadels, the markets (Suqs), gates, and walls With regard to the Christian religious sites of Jerusalem they are regarded as the most important in the world containing various churches and monasteries of the Christian religion as The Church of Holy Sepulcher (Sha'th, 1995; MWNF & PA, 2004).

As Jerusalem is a unique place and major consideration in religious tourism, there are a lot of villages, districts and towns considered sacred which attract tourists and pilgrims to visit and stopover in them such as Hebron, Bethlehem, Jericho, Nazareth and Nablus.

Sabri *et al.*, (2005) demonstrated the religious and historical significance of Bethlehem town dating back to the fourteenth century BC this city is mentioned in the Amarna letters, and also mentioned in the bible. The city called it Lehmo in the Canaanite period which meant the god of fertility for them, for many centuries pilgrims were visiting it and some of them were of nobility and Patriarchs such as, the mother of the Emperor, Constantine 'Queen Hilana', She requested from her son to build the Church of the Nativity, which was built on the holy cave of Jesus. In the period of Caliph's "Omar Bin Al Khattab" he visited this town and then there is his mosque near the nativity church which is a sign of the freedom of religious property of the Christians.

The town of Jericho at the crossing between Jordan and Palestine, has the (Allenby crossing), which is the only access for residents of the West Bank to visit neighboring countries and the nations of the world via Jordan. Jericho is an important city for tourism through a variety of tourist attractions in it, and its considered the town for winter vacation for the Palestinian people, because of its warmth in winter season and also for having the best dates, citrus fruits and bananas in the world, the ancient town of Jericho has been associated with ancient walls, (oldest city in the world, which dates back to 10,000 B.C) as well as having a lot of historical and religious sites (PECDAR, 2005).

Political Instability and Tourism

Goeldner and Ritchie (2006) showed that the tourism plays a vital role in the economy for all of the countries of the world, also providing employment, incomes, taxes revenues and foreign exchange. All of these features come from visitors when visiting the destinations, whereas the visitors will play a role in the income of the economics and increasing the GDP. At the same time, these benefits do not getting without political stability. There are a lot of things which affect tourist destinations such as wars, conflicts, crises, terrorism and SARS.

Political instability related with tourism can have very negative effects on tourism destinations which will decline the number of tourists who visit the destinations and also will bring suffering to the tourism industry are caused tourism is sensitive and a volatile industry and all of these effects from political instability such as armed attacks, civil wars, bombings, attacks on tourists, wars, change in government, threat of war with another country, which will deter or obstruct the image of the destination through media reporting and government policies and even word of mouth reporting (Seddighi *et al.*, 2001).

Page and Connell (2006) argued that the impact of instability can have direct impact on tourism and negative images about the destinations will travel to tourists by word of mouth, government policies and media at the same time these tools of impact will convert the trend of behavior travel for them as well as lead to the decline in the number of visitors, the authors explained the influencing by political turmoil upon tourism in some countries (e.g. Fiji, China, Tibet Spain, Peru and Northern Ireland).

A study by Altinay and Brown (2006) Suggested that tourism production in Cyprus can be the greatest through an economic environment and a stable politics. At the same time, unstable politics threatens tourism in Cyprus and also the neighboring countries particularly, Turkey and Greece. In the other side, both the Gulf conflict in 1990 and the Turkish foray in 1974 were effected by the number of foreign visitors. Therefore, there was an increase in the problems and downturns in these economies. In another issue when the war in Croatia began in 1991 there was a decline almost 5 billion US Dollars in GDP only from tourism caused by the effects of the war and crisis, nevertheless declined the number of visitors to Croatia approximately 75% and the spending in tourism sector arrived to 77% a decline (Currie *et al.*, 2004).

Impact of Instability on Tourism in Palestine

The tourism industry in Palestine under suffered through the decrease number of international tourist arrivals and domestic tourist as excursionists since the fall peace process in mid 2000, and political instability in Palestine (Refer to Figure 4). From the period which with started the signing of the peace convention between PLO and Israel on September 28 2000.until now, There was an improvement in the political situation whereas there was an

increase in the tourist infrastructure through the Palestinian authority which encouraged the investors to investment in tourism as hotels, according to (PCBS, 2000) the extent increased from 54 hotels with 2,464 rooms, in 1994 to 91 hotels with 4,275 rooms in 2000 (Refer to Figure 5). Another effect on tourism in Palestine through the domination of tourism in Palestine by Israeli control from three decades ago, Israel controls borders in Palestine and it is very difficult for the Palestinian Authority (PA) to obtain the inbound and outbound statistics. Therefore, brought those by statistics from hotels by Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, (PCBS). Also the number of tour guides increased from 18 tour guides to 223 tour guides.

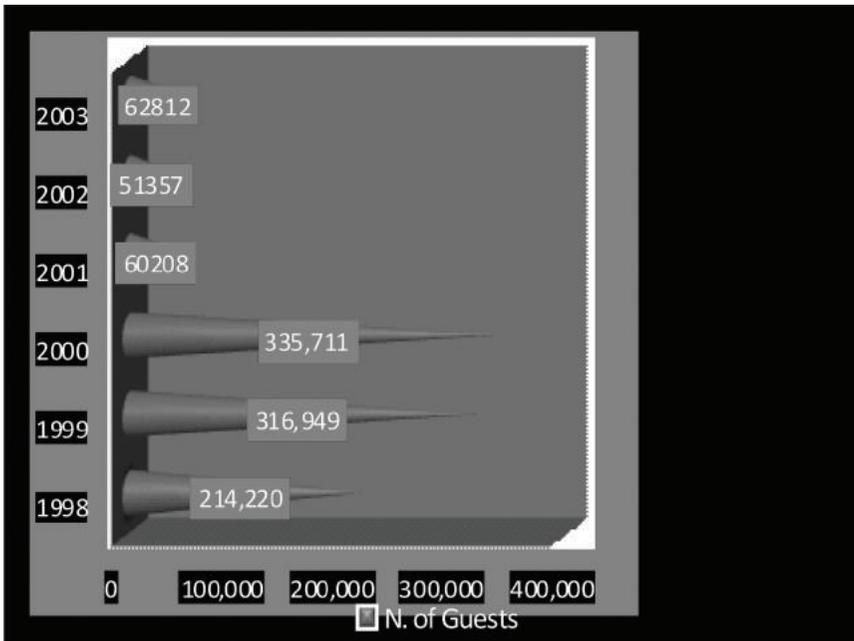


Figure 4: Number of Guests to hotels in Palestinian Territories from 1998-2003

(International alert, 2006) showed that in 2000 direct employment in the tourism sector was almost 5,715 jobs, which amounted a total of 226.3 million dollars, according to this study that visitors to the Palestine authority territories was 1.055 million in 2000 while 330,000 of them stayed overnight, also all hotels which were under construction stopped in the west bank and Gaza strip and a lot of tourists were canceling their visits to PA areas, this

caused the closing of tourism establishments and some of tourist facilities suffered, with a decline in employment.

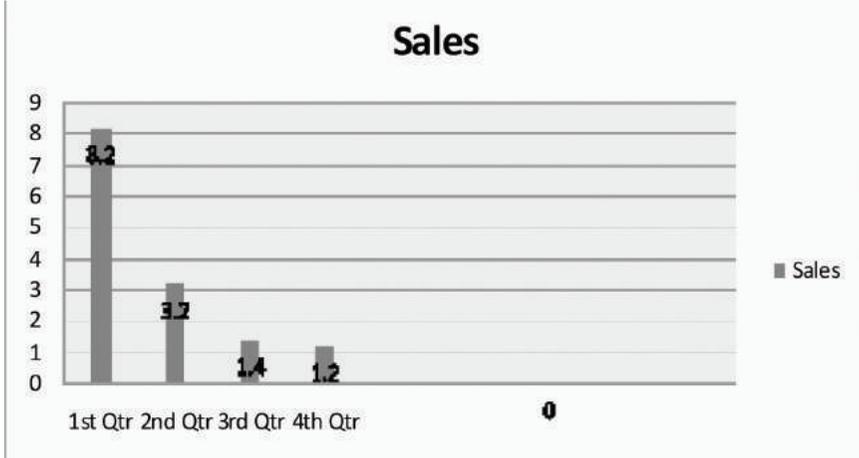
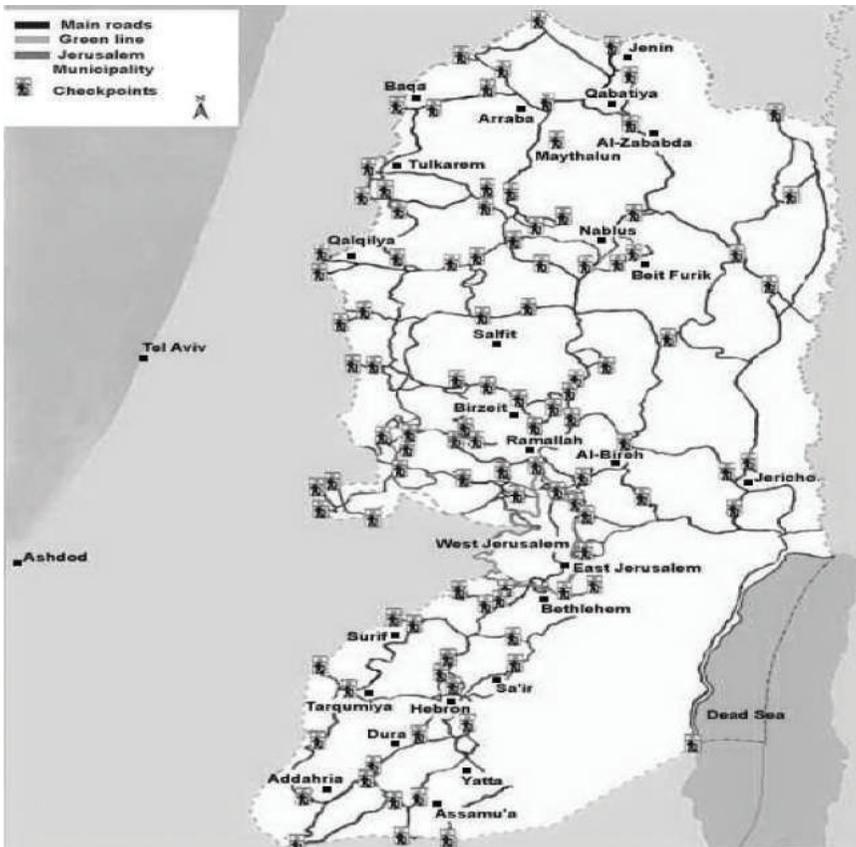


Figure 5: Numbers of Hotel in Palestinian Territories from 1998-2006

There are many influences of Israeli occupation and domination on tourism and religious sites as well as buildings such as the mosques, khanqas and madrasas in the Palestine territories (1) when visitors come to Palestinian cities without spending a night in Palestinian accommodation. (2) Without eat a meal in Palestinian restaurants. (3) Without patronizing Palestinian stores. (4) Visitors receive a biased superficial picture of the political situation. (5) Seldom to visiting the Palestinian interesting sites. (6) Distorting the basic information about the Palestinian population and their history and culture. (7) Demolishing of environment and heritage sites, and historical places, parks, forests by tanks and bulldozers. (8) Apartheid wall and settlements around the west bank. (9) Checkpoints everywhere existing between the towns, villages and countryside (Figure 6). (10) Movement restrictions either population or tourists amongst towns. Sizer, S. (1999) highlighted on Israeli restrictions which imposed on Palestinian hotels in east Jerusalem that became static, and also there are few licenses given to Palestinian tour guides and a monopoly those for licenses given to Israeli tour guides.



Source: <http://www.cmep.org/delegations/maps/Checkpoints%20in%20West%20Bank.jg>

Figure 6: Israeli Checkpoints in the West Bank

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Palestine is unique, for its history, heritage, culture, geographic, location, environment and religions. The tourism in Palestine is major economic sector, it presents to the tourist who is looking for a different experience of the inventory of cultural and natural heritage of Palestine as well.

The results indicate that the impact of political instability on tourism in Palestine are likely to drop from time to time and increase of poverty in Palestine due to the war and loss of tourism revenues caused a decrease of the number of visitors and their time spent in Palestine due to the effects of Israeli occupation such as closure, curfews, checkpoints, segregation walls, sieges, assassinations, damage of environment, movement restrictions and so on, all of these impacts obstruct tourism in Palestine and also influence domestic and international tourism decisions for choice of destination.

This paper is suggest to ministry of tourism and antiquities in Palestine, the universities in Palestine, associations and institutions which are related to tourism, religious and cultural heritage in Palestine, religious leaders, decisions to challenge the occupation and its impact on religious sites and tourist sites through protection of Islamic and Christian holy sites in Palestine as well as activating the studies dealing with the reality of tourism in Palestine and impact of the occupation to the destruction of the heritage and the long history of Islam and Christianity in Palestine.

This study suggests to the ministry of tourism in Palestine to create new ways to protect Islamic and Christian places in Palestine as well as to invite new tourists to visit it for dark tourism in Palestine and should on tour operators are choose another ways to attract of tourists, therefore will increase of revenue of the residents around those religious sites.

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